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If the United States Had 'No' Policy Toward North Korea

Strategic Insights, Volume IV, Issue 10 (October 2005)

by [Edward A. Olsen](#)

Strategic Insights is a monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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Introduction

The North Korean nuclear agreement brokered by China at the Six Party Talks in Beijing represents progress for the United States' ambition of blocking the DPRK's nuclear weapons ambitions. As important as the agreement to halt North Korea's nuclear weapons programs, return to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), permit IAEA inspectors to return to North Korean sites, and continue the difficult talks toward a lasting resolution are to the United States' ambitions vis-a-vis North Korean threat potentials,^[1] the United States would be well advised not to pat itself on the back too visibly.

Although U.S. pressures clearly played a major role in inducing Pyongyang to make crucial concessions in exchange for comparatively limited reciprocal offers, it is even more clear that the decisive role in convincing North Korea to change course was played by a combination of China and South Korea.

China used its clout as the host-sponsor of the Six Party Talks and status as North Korea's closest partner, key advisor, and essential benefactor to persuade North Korea to compromise. Equally important, China's recognition of the growing economic and geopolitical bond between the PRC and the ROK, coupled with Beijing's grasp of the importance of the Roh Moo-hyun government's nuanced engagement approach to inter-Korean reconciliation and reunification, put China in an excellent position to be a catalyst for resolving the nuclear controversy in a way that can satisfy the United States, but more importantly be instrumental in accelerating improved inter-Korean relations under China's auspices as a benevolent good neighbor drawing on a long Confucian tradition of Sinocentrism in Eastern Asia.

To make this work requires the kind of diplomatic and cultural finesse China subtly displayed in its approach to the Six Party Talks by adapting President Roh's engagement policies toward North Korea within the PRC's policies toward both Koreas. This enabled Beijing to make its case to Pyongyang in terms that would benefit the entire Korean nation enroute to the shared Korean goal of reunification

The United States' policy toward the divided Korean nation has been convoluted from the start of Korea's division in the early days of the Cold War. American policymakers in that formative period

were ill-prepared for dealing with Korea, knew little about its lengthy history or aspirations after being liberated from Japanese Imperialism, and pursued profoundly ambiguous policies. Those policies could not articulate what U.S. national interests vis-a-vis the entire Korean peninsula were and paid virtually no attention to the spectrum of Korean views about Korean national interests. In retrospect, the poor quality of post-World War II U.S. policy toward Korea was not surprising, given the United States' history of flawed decisions toward Korea in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In contrast, the Soviet Union's policies toward the Korean nation in the formative phase of the Cold War were better planned in terms of Soviet Marxist interests, drew on long-standing Russian ambitions regarding Korea, and were pursued in ways that were very attentive to Moscow's perception of Korean sensitivity about Korean national interests.

A major consequence of those circumstances was the close ties between the USSR and its North Korean offshoot that shaped both the origins of the Korean War and its legacy for the Asian theater of the Cold War, versus the more ambivalent U.S.-South Korean relationships prior to the Korean War that were solidified the hard way during that conflict in a manner that also shaped the evolution of the Cold War in Asia. In short, U.S. policy toward the Korean nation divided into two rival states became far firmer but still very convoluted. The U.S.-ROK alliance relationship settled into a pattern of close mentor-client state bonds while the U.S.-DPRK adversarial relationship became entrenched, bitter, and mutually ill-informed. In the context of this historical background[2] the United States' policies, past and present, toward the two states expounding the divided Korean nation's aspirations for reunification have been and are troubled by U.S. problems in dealing with how those aspirations interact with each other, and do not mesh well with the evolution of U.S. national interests toward Korea and its Asian regional setting.

Against this background, has the United States' policy toward North Korea in recent times been effective? The blunt answer is an ambiguous one: not as much as its advocates think it is.

The United States has not devised the means on its own to induce North Korea to truly abandon its nuclear weapons agenda. The results that have been accomplished undoubtedly were motivated by U.S. interests in containing DPRK nuclear ambitions, but the decisive actions were the result of China and South Korea engaging North Korea in innovative negotiations both at the Six Party Talks and—arguably more important—in other meetings focused on socio-economic means to facilitate Korean national reconciliation. Nor have the harsh pressures the United States exerts on North Korea precipitated sufficient internal circumstances to provoke regime change of the sort the most hawkish American opponents of Kim Jong-il have advocated.

Similarly, so far the seriously flawed policies of the Pyongyang government have not been sufficiently inept to lead to any of the collapse scenarios that have been raised over the years by American advocates of a hawkish approach, who clearly hoped some such scenario would be accelerated by U.S. pressures. Hence the answer to the question about the overall effectiveness of U.S. policy on North Korean issues must remain negative—i.e., "no."

This has had significant impact on the credibility of U.S. policy toward North Korea which, in turn, has had major consequences for U.S. relations with South Korea, China, and Japan. In this context it may be time for Americans and their government to consider the possible benefits of another "no" option for U.S. policy toward North Korea.

At the same time as U.S. policy regarding its nuclear and other problems with North Korea has been so troubled, South Korea's engagement initiatives toward the northern half of the long divided Korean peninsula under the guidance of President Roh Moo-hyun have been comparatively successful in getting Pyongyang's attention, nudging China to be supportive of the inter-Korean dialogue process, and setting the stage for the further progress which has now been

achieved via the Six Party Talks. The approach of the United States' South Korean ally toward North Korea via the Roh policy has been much more successful, notwithstanding Roh's domestic political problems. Washington might well consider adapting a version of the Roh policy toward inter-Korean affairs as U.S. policy toward possible Korean reconciliation and reunification. Bearing in mind how Koreans phonetically pronounce the name Roh—i.e., "no"—a strong case can be made that the United States needs a Roh policy of its own for coping with North Korea, as suggested in the title of this essay.

South Korea's Roh policy builds upon the precedents established in Seoul's previous administration under Kim Dae-jung. While both of these governments' electoral track records have greatly strengthened South Korean democracy compared to their more authoritarian predecessors in Seoul, neither's pro-democracy stance has been sufficient to gain strong rapport with the Bush administration—despite its emphasis on spreading democracy worldwide. President Kim's innovative development of his "Sunshine Policy" of flexible ROK engagement with the DPRK,^[3] use of inter-Korean summitry, and willingness to break the client state mold of U.S.-ROK relations en route to cultivating improved peninsular relations gained major recognition in the form of his winning the Nobel Peace Prize.

Via these policies President Kim fundamentally changed the tone of South Korea's approach to North Korea and established the foundation upon which the Roh administration has created a still more flexible set of policies. These two ROK governments' very liberal approach to world affairs—especially when applied to inter-Korean affairs, North Korea's diplomatic brinkmanship strategy, and acceptance of the impact China's growing global clout is having upon Asia—have not bolstered the image of either Kim or Roh in the eyes of the Bush administration. Instead the United States exerted its own forms of pressure upon the PRC to encourage China to be a positive intermediary in the nuclear issue.

As much as China is content to let Americans believe what they want to believe about why Beijing helped Washington persuade the Kim Jong-il government to concede on the nuclear issue, the representatives of China and the two Koreas can sense a different dynamic at work in which Korean responses to both China's stature and its interests in Korea matter more. In particular, President Roh's advocacy of the ROK as a "balancer" in the regional system that reflects the ROK's closer bonds with the PRC and unease about the objectives of U.S.-Japan policies in influencing China's approach to Korea^[4] has not been well received in Washington but it has been in Beijing and Pyongyang. Therefore the notion of adapting a Roh policy paradigm within U.S. policy toward North Korea will not be an easy sell.

Nonetheless, it is a worthwhile approach. If the United States were to create an agenda to deal overtly with North Korea as part of the entire Korean nation, in recognition of the ongoing efforts of both the ROK and the DPRK to reconcile their differences, foster peaceful co-existence, and create the foundation upon which a reunited Korean nation state can be built via creative engagement by both sides, the United States would be far better positioned to resolve its diverse differences with North Korea in cooperation with South Korea. Functionally, the United States could bolster its ability to cooperate with the ROK by improving its means for systemic and intellectual dialogue between South Korean and American policy planners.^[5]

However, to truly cooperate with South Koreans vis-a-vis North Korea, the United States needs to reassess the ways U.S. policy is not perceived in North Korea as positively as ROK policy is. The best way to do that would be to appreciate the merits of the Roh policy's priorities regarding encouraging North Korean systemic transformation economically that will motivate Pyongyang to be more accommodating with economic partners in South Korea, China, and other countries.^[6] The more the DPRK will emulate the state-controlled socio-economic models of the ROK and the PRC, the more likely this will positively influence North Korea politically and strategically.

If Washington would adapt this paradigm within U.S. policy by making Korean unification a much higher priority within U.S. policy toward both Koreas than it has been in the past and is today, it too could build mutual confidence between the United States and North Korea.

To do this, American leaders would have to stop perceiving such engagement overtures as appeasement and tone down preconditions linked to verifiable nuclear concessions by Pyongyang. This does not mean the United States should "appease" the DPRK nor abandon its non-proliferation goals that are making progress. Instead, it should learn to appreciate how adapting the Kim-Roh inter-Korean agenda to U.S. policy can instill innovative flexibility within U.S. policy that will enable it to generate incentives in North Korea to reciprocally engage with the United States in ways that will facilitate solid U.S. support for inter-Korean reconciliation and reunification. A very significant by-product of the mutual U.S.-DPRK flexibility would be creating incentives on both sides—with the support of the ROK and the PRC—for genuine resolution of the contentious nuclear issue as the talks continue to evolve.

The United States can indeed get what it wants out of North Korea if it can learn to be a catalyst for putting into North Korea the kinds of ingredients that will generate the sort of growing multilateral rapport which results from the Roh policy. So, the United States should shed its negative "no" policy in favor of adapting a positive Roh policy that will better serve both U.S. national interests and the long term national interests of the entire Korean nation.

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